

A Farewell to the CIA's 'Mr. Clean'

The Washington Post
The New York Times
The Washington Times
The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
USA Today
The Chicago Tribune

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JUDGE William Webster's stay at the CIA was a memorable one if for no other reason than this: He built trust in an organization that, under William Casey, had lost the confidence of much of Congress and much of the American people.

Judge Webster is a thoughtful, quiet-spoken, courteous fellow, not exactly the sort one would expect to be put in charge of first the FBI and then the CIA. He left his stamp of civility on both organizations. Not a little thing.

Also, and importantly, Bill Webster, while at both the FBI and CIA, was able to build bridges between these agencies and the media. Webster is genuinely liked and admired by journalists. They applaud his modesty and his willingness to level with them as much as he can. And while they sometimes fault his performance, they hail his signal success in making these organizations play by the rules.

It's no surprise, therefore, that editorial accolades for Webster have come in from coast to coast. Typical is this comment in the New York Times: "Mr. Webster's discretion and candor were a refreshing change. He reined in lawless covert operations and rebuilt trust on Capitol Hill."

The Washington Post says that Webster, while at the CIA, "took over a troubled institution, brought in a full measure of probity and steadiness and largely restored public and congressional confidence in a sensitive agency where the demands of government and individual liberty easily collide." What particularly caught my eye was E. J. Dionne Jr.'s evaluation of Webster's contribution. The Washington Post writer sees Webster as one of several "Mr. Cleans" or "Honest People" who have, since Watergate, restored confidence in government.

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Other examples he cites include Gerald Ford taking stepping into the White House after Richard Nixon resigned. Some observers had gloomily predicted that, after Watergate, the presidency had lost its credibility for years to come. What was there about that morning scene showing Jerry Ford making his own breakfast in the White House that assured us that, as he had promised, the "long nightmare" was over?

In fact, the public is always looking for an Honest Man to take over government, particularly if there have been big scandals. General Eisenhower was elevated to the presidency in large part because of the scandal-ridden Truman administration that preceded his White House bid.

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Webster's image of honesty and fair dealing never ebbed, but he had his detractors. From the very beginning of his CIA assignment, some within that agency and in the upper circles of the White House found his presence there unacceptable. He didn't know the territory. The complaint followed that he was unable to deal adequately with substantive matters requiring CIA experience and spy-chief savvy.

In addition to this criticism, the media continually ran stories about Webster being on his way out. First, there were "sources" asserting that when Bush took over in 1989 he would replace Webster with a more seasoned hand. The new president was a former CIA director himself, the commentary went, and he would insist on having a more experienced person at the helm.

When that didn't happen, "reports" circulated that the president had been dissatisfied with the intelligence he had received in connection with the Panama operation and that he was therefore going to replace Webster.

These stories reflected the views of Webster's critics — but not those held by Mr. Bush. What these rumors — and they really were no more than carefully leaked rumors — omitted was basic. For a number of years Bush and Webster had been, and continued to be, close friends. Bush liked the friendly, unassuming Bill Webster, and he let his White House colleagues know that he believed Webster brought conscientiousness and a high-degree of competence to anything he did. Above all, he honored Webster's integrity and the credibility he was restoring to the CIA.

That's how the president felt about Bill Webster as he reluctantly let him go and, in announcing the departure, called Webster "Pal."

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